

Jordan

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Freedom of the Press

The Jordanian press faced heightened challenges in 2013 under the government of Prime Minister Abdullah Ensour. Journalists encountered a marked increase in physical attacks as well as restrictions on coverage of controversial topics, including the Zaatari refugee camp and demonstrations calling for reform. In addition, a recent amendment to the press law extended licensing requirements to news websites, and there was an increase in censorship of online news content.

The constitution guarantees freedoms of speech and expression, but press laws contain vague clauses that restrict media activity in practice. Journalists can be prosecuted under the penal code or tried by the quasi-military State Security Court (SSC) for offenses involving speech and association. A 2011 law criminalized reporting on corruption, including news that defames someone or “impacts his dignity.” The 1998 Press and Publications Law prescribes fines of almost \$40,000 for speech that denigrates the government or religion. A 2010 amendment to the law established specialized courts to prosecute press violations.

Further changes to the Press and Publications Law were passed in September 2012, imposing restrictions on online news content and requiring news websites to obtain licenses to operate. The amendments apply the law’s existing provisions to websites, making it unlawful for online outlets to insult the royal family, harm “Arab-Islamic values,” or incite sectarian strife, among other prohibitions. Site owners are also responsible for patrolling reader comments to ensure that they do not violate the law. The government’s Press and Publications Department can issue orders, without a court ruling, to block foreign and domestic websites that fail to comply with the law.

Criminal charges against journalists are often withdrawn before they get to trial, but the government routinely uses the justice system to stifle dissent. In April 2013, parliament member Mohammad Asha al-Dawaymeh sued the news site *Ammon News* for publishing an article about his visit to Israel to attend a reception at the home of the Israeli president, which led his political party to expel him. In September, Nidhal al-Fara’neh and Amjad Mu’ala, two employees at the *Jafra News* website, were arrested and charged with “disturbing relations with a foreign state” after publishing an article that contained a third-party YouTube video allegedly showing a Qatari prince in compromising situations with three different women. The two journalists were held for 100 days before being released on bail on December 31, with their case referred to the Amman Court of First Instance at year’s end. In October, Issam al-Omari, a radio host, was referred to an Amman criminal court on charges of violating the audiovisual media law after he criticized the prime minister on air. In November, prosecutors accused Hashim al-Khalidi, the publisher and editor in chief of the news site *Saraya*, of “distorting facts, publishing false information, and causing harm to others” after the site published documents showing that the Ministry of Education had leaked questions on a national examination in advance.

In 2007 Jordan became the first country in the region to pass a Right to Access Information Law. Nonetheless, journalists complain that while the outlets for news have multiplied, their efforts to obtain information on government policies and officials are often obstructed in practice. According to the Amman-based Center for Defending Freedom of Journalists, implementation of the 2007 law suffers from arbitrary classification and distribution of information by the different ministries and state institutions. In 2013, deliberations continued on a series of amendments to the law that would extend the right of access to

foreigners, require officials to provide or refuse information within 15 days, and grant the applicant the right to appeal refusals. The proposed amendments also stipulate that the president of the press association will become a member of the Council of Information, currently staffed by a substantial majority of government officials.

Both print media and, under the amended Press and Publications Law, online outlets must register with the Ministry of Commerce and Industry and obtain licenses from the Ministry of Culture's Department of Press and Publications. Journalists must belong to the Jordan Press Association (JPA) to work legally. Those who are critical of the government have sometimes been excluded from JPA membership. Furthermore, the chief editors of news websites must have at least four years of prior membership in the JPA in order to obtain a license, and licensing fees for news sites cost \$1,400, which critics say is too expensive.

Licensing responsibilities for television and radio are shared between the Council of Ministers, the Audiovisual Commission (AVC), and the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission (TRC). The Council of Ministers is responsible for granting, revoking, and renewing licenses, but it does so based on the recommendations of the AVC. In February 2013, the Saraya satellite news station claimed that the Council of Ministers deliberately delayed granting it a new operating license, while the satellite channel Al-Yarmouk protested against licensing delays in October. The AVC also handles disputes between broadcasters, issues directions on programming, and takes punitive action against broadcasters that violate their licensing conditions. The TRC is responsible for allocating frequencies to broadcasters, issuing telecommunications licenses, and managing information-technology services.

The government tolerates some criticism of officials and policies, and allows room for opposition movements to express their ideas. However, government attempts to influence editorial content occur regularly, with top officials and security operatives contacting editors and warning them not to publish stories on politically sensitive issues. Journalists routinely practice self-censorship and know which "red lines" not to cross, including that pertaining to negative reporting about the royal family. In early November 2013, members of the state-owned Jordan Press Foundation and staff of its daily newspaper *Al-Rai* organized a sit-in to protest interference by the prime minister in the paper's operations. Later the same day, security forces stormed the area and attempted to dismantle the sit-in. On November 11, *Al-Rai* staff staged a one-day strike, suspending production for the first time in 42 years. The strike soon ended when the protesters' list of demands were fulfilled, including the replacement of Mazen Saket, a former interior minister who had been slated to head the organization. In December, staff from *Ad-Dustour*, another daily whose parent organization is majority owned by the state, staged a protest over salary delays and government interference in its editorial content.

In part due to a lack of diversity of viewpoints in traditional media, the online sphere has quickly grown into a space for independent reporting and news. However, in June 2013 the government blocked approximately 300 of Jordan's 400 local news sites for failing to adhere to new registration and licensing provisions. The move followed a nine-month grace period after the passage of the amended Press and Publications Law, during which time Prime Minister Ensour repeatedly gave assurances that the law would not be implemented until further consultations with local press organizations took place. Many news sites have since registered, altered their status to become a general or cultural site instead of a news site, or set up alternative mirror sites, although the Press and Publications Department ordered these blocked as well. In October, several news sites, including *AmmanNet*, *Jo24*, *Ain News*, *Khabar Jo*, *All of Jo*, and *Tiber*, filed an appeal with the High Court of Justice claiming that the blocking order was unconstitutional, but the court rejected the complaint. In another development, the Jordanian Writers' Association asked its members in December to submit their social-media posts for review prior to publication.

Journalists were repeatedly impeded or prevented from covering the news in 2013, especially on controversial topics including the January parliamentary elections and conditions at the Zaatari refugee

camp. In April 2013, Al-Arabiya television correspondent Ghassan Abu Loz was denied access to Zaatari and banned from further reporting there. Syrian refugees at the camp attacked a crew from Al-Arabiya in October and attempted to destroy their camera. Authorities prevented journalists from covering pro-reform demonstrations in April and sit-ins in front of foreign embassies in May. In June, officials expelled reporters from two parliamentary committee meetings. Ahmad al-Harasis, a correspondent with *Jo24*, was beaten by security forces in October while covering protests. Reports also surfaced during the year of correspondents being forced to delete photographs they took while covering protests.

Although it is not uncommon for members of the press to be targeted for their reporting, the year featured a marked increase in the number of incidents of intimidation and physical attacks. In February, Youssef al-Bustanji, a correspondent from Ro'ya television, was approached by two counternarcotics policemen and beaten in the middle of the street. In April, journalist Walid Hosni received threats after releasing information about al-Dawaymeh's visit to Israel. In July, unknown assailants assaulted and raided the office of Hassan Khreisat, editor of the weekly newspaper *Al-Hayat* and secretary general of the Jordanian Writers' Association. Unidentified gunmen attempted to assassinate Islam al-Mashaqba, a journalist with *Al-Ghad*, as he was leaving his home in October. Alaa Fazaa', publisher of the online news site *Khabar Jo*, fled to Sweden in October to request asylum, claiming that he had faced threats and "political pressures" during the past three years as a result of his reporting.

While some Jordanian news outlets are independent, much of the country's media sector is state run. The government-owned Social Security Investment Fund has a majority stake in Jordan Press and Publishing, which runs the major daily *Ad-Dustour*, as well as in the Jordan Press Foundation, which publishes the English-language *Jordan Times* and *Al-Rai*, the most popular daily. *Al-Arab al-Yawm*, considered to be Jordan's main independent paper, suspended operations for two months starting in July 2013, citing financial difficulties. Fourteen employees were fired during this period in a move that human rights organizations say contravened labor laws. Unregistered, independent news sites also struggled to remain financially viable given that companies are reluctant to buy advertising space on their blocked sites. Bribery threatens independent reporting, and in the past dozens of media professionals have been accused of accepting payments from the former director of the General Intelligence Department. *Ammon News* reported in April 2013 that al-Dawaymeh had offered economic incentives for not publishing a story on his controversial trip to Israel.

The 2003 audiovisual law ended the government monopoly on terrestrial broadcasting, and there has been an increase in the number of private radio stations in recent years—mainly regional outlets that cater to a specific demographic, such as women or students. However, terrestrial television stations remain under state control; the country's first privately owned television channel, launched as a pilot project in 2007, has since stalled. Satellite dishes are allowed, and pan-Arab news channels remain popular. About 44 percent of the population had access to the internet in 2013.

2014 Scores

Press Status

Not Free

Press Freedom Score

(0 = best, 100 = worst)

Legal Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

22

Political Environment

(0 = best, 40 = worst)

26

Economic Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

20